

Chiara Margarita Cozzolani: Vespro della Beata Vergine
Magnificat
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Convent sounds that stir the soul

Magnificat explores the music of one of the 17th century's greatest musical nuns

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For the 17th century music lover visiting or living in Italy, courts and cathedrals were all very well. But the most famously resplendent music-making of the era took place within the convent. Behind the walls of dozens of convents in every major Italian city were learned, highly trained nuns who wrote and performed music of the utmost virtuosity and sophistication. We're not talking "Climb Ev'ry Mountain" here. Getting that music out of history and into the ears of contemporary listeners, though, has been a slow process, requiring the combined efforts of musicologists and pioneering performers like conductor Warren Stewart and his early music ensemble Magnificat. Next weekend, Magnificat will continue its exploration of the music of one of the 17th century's greatest musical nuns, Chiara Margarita Cozzolani, with three performances of her "Mass of the Blessed Virgin." And to judge by last year's renditions of Cozzolani's music for the Vespers service -- now captured on a gorgeous new CD on the Musica Omnia label -- this promises to be music of unparalleled beauty and depth. "It's music that doesn't simply sing itself -- you have to pull it off the page," Stewart says of Cozzolani's writing for eight female voices. "It alternates between flashy solo stuff and passages for the full octet. For the singers, it's like playing a concerto one minute and a string quartet the next, and it's not an easy combination." Clearly, though, Cozzolani had singers at her disposal in the Milanese convent of Santa Radegonda who could pull it off. In fact, performances at the convent -- which seem, oddly enough, to have been open to outsiders -- were among the chief attractions for musical travelers from all over Europe. "Throughout this period, you get a wide range of visitors going to the convents to hear the music, as opposed to the cathedrals," says University of Chicago professor Robert Kendrick, who specializes in music of the Italian convents. "And S. Radegonda was only the most popular of them -- there were 25 convents in Milan alone that had some kind of respectable musical life. They were simply the most famous institutions for music-making from 1600 up to the early 18th century." The tradition of convent music developed out of a range of religious, social and artistic influences, Kendrick says. For one thing, the demographics of convents changed sharply during the 17th century, with as much as 70 percent of the upper-class female population taking religious vows. "One reason for that was financial. Although a dowry was required to get your daughter into a convent, it was only 20 to 40 percent of what you'd need to marry her to a noble husband." The preponderance of well-born, well-educated nuns meant that most of a convent population had musical training, as well as the financial means to acquire more. And because of church restrictions on activity outside the convents, they had plenty of time to develop their musical skills. Restrictions on interaction with the outside world yielded one side benefit, Kendrick says. "Because the nuns were able to dodge public health hazards like the plague, they were very long-lived by the standards of the day -- some of them lived into their 80s. "So for a musician like Cozzolani, it means that you have a lot of trained musicians to pick for your ensembles, and then you have them around for something like 50 or

60 years." Cozzolani's published music, concentrated in two collections of psalm settings meant for liturgical use, shows evidence of lively inventiveness and a keen awareness of contemporary artistic trends. "Stylistically, the music is completely up to date," Kendrick says. "It's not as though it is frozen in 1620 when she took her vows." But not much is known for certain about the woman behind the notes. She was born in 1602 into a well-off Milanese family of textile merchants. At 18, she followed an aunt and older sister into S. Radegonda and remained there until her death, sometime in the 1670s. Much of her musical activity was concentrated during her first decades in the convent. After 1650 she became abbess and prioress, and a new and deeply conservative archbishop made musical life more difficult. Cozzolani's charges didn't always help matters, either -- in 1658, a scandal broke out when a young singer absconded from the convent in the company of two men. Instead of writing music, the abbess was left to do frantic damage control with the ecclesiastical authorities in Milan and Rome. By the early 18th century, the nuns' musical traditions had begun to fade, done in by declining convent populations and the new prominence of female opera singers. But the intricate, richly expressive music that Cozzolani and others composed is finally beginning to be heard again. That process depends not only on academic sleuths like Kendrick but on imaginative performers like Stewart, who have managed to re-create not only the music itself but the liturgical contexts on which it depends. Cozzolani, like any composer of her time, wrote and published only the motets and psalm settings that constitute the most ornate musical part of a worship service. For both last year's Vespers and this weekend's Mass (which will also be recorded by Musica Omnia), Stewart had to provide the plainchant and other liturgical elements to fill out the service. It's a kind of music-historical reverse engineering, he says. "At the time, they were doing everything they could to make going to church more like a concert. And here I am trying to make a concert more like going to church." Performances of Cozzolani's "Mass of the Blessed Virgin" are at 8 p. m. Friday at the First Lutheran Church in Palo Alto, 8 p.m. Saturday at First Congregational Church in Berkeley and 4 p.m. next Sunday at St. Gregory Nyssen Episcopal Church in San Francisco. Tickets: \$12-\$25. Call (415) 979-4500 or go to www.magnificatsf.com. E-mail Joshua Kosman at jkosman@sfchronicle.com.

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